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# Waiting for the Wisdom to Drop: A Photovoice Exploration of Menopause

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# Waiting for the Wisdom to Drop: A PhotoVoice Exploration of Menopause

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to create a women's menopause discussion group based on the PhotoVoice method, to use a narrative approach to learn what is currently relevant in the experience of menopausal women, to reveal insights about menopause as a phase of psychological development, and to bring a visual representation together with narratives to tell a story about the collective psychological themes. Participants were asked to meet and reflect on what has changed in their values, attitudes, aspirations, goals, and outlook on life. Then participants were asked to take pictures over the course of a week, and bring them back to the group to share their stories of the meanings of the photos. Photos and recorded narratives were then sorted into themes, and categories were created with photos and narrative to represent the phases of the inner experience of the menopausal transition that the participants had expressed. The categories were found to reveal the arc of a journey representing a rapid change of self-identity with 9 phases: initiation, self-consciousness, effort, perspective, deconstruction, surrender, reorganization, integration and growth. Participants found value in community connection, with the opportunity to validate and normalize their internal experiences through communication.

## Methods

### Study Design

N = 6  
Recruitment: crowd-sourced convenience sample  
Age range: 50-60 years  
Two groups, one week apart  
Participants instructed to bring photos to the second group  
**Research questions:**  
• What about your life is important to you now that was not important to you before menopause?  
• How have your values, aspirations, goals, and outlook on life changed during your menopausal transition?

### Objectives

To facilitate a discussion group using PhotoVoice method and a narrative approach to learn what is currently relevant and important to menopausal women, to reveal insights about the "taboo topic" of menopause as a phase of psychological development.

### PhotoVoice Method

- Community-based Participatory Action Method based on feminist theory and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Frère
- Developed by Carolyn Wang, D.Ph. for use in a study on women's health in China
- Used in realm of public health and social sciences because it empowers participants to reveal insights into their own world that a researcher might overlook

### Qualitative analysis

- A three-part process completed by the facilitator:
- 1) Photographs were sorted into categories, either related by common visual qualities or participant-attributed meaning.
  - 2) Recorded data was reviewed and coded into themes. The categories of photographs were named with related comments, made by participants, that reflected the theme, and each category was summed up with a pertinent or poignant quote by a participant.
  - 3) An overarching theme began to develop, which resembled a journey or process. The participants' descriptions of the unfolding of internal and external events in their menopausal transition determined the order in which the categories were placed.

Note: This does not represent the experience of every participant, however, it represents a generalized arc of experience, with a motion of development from one state of being to another.

**A special thank you to the participants who generously donated their time and creative expression.**

## The 9 phases of menopause experience:



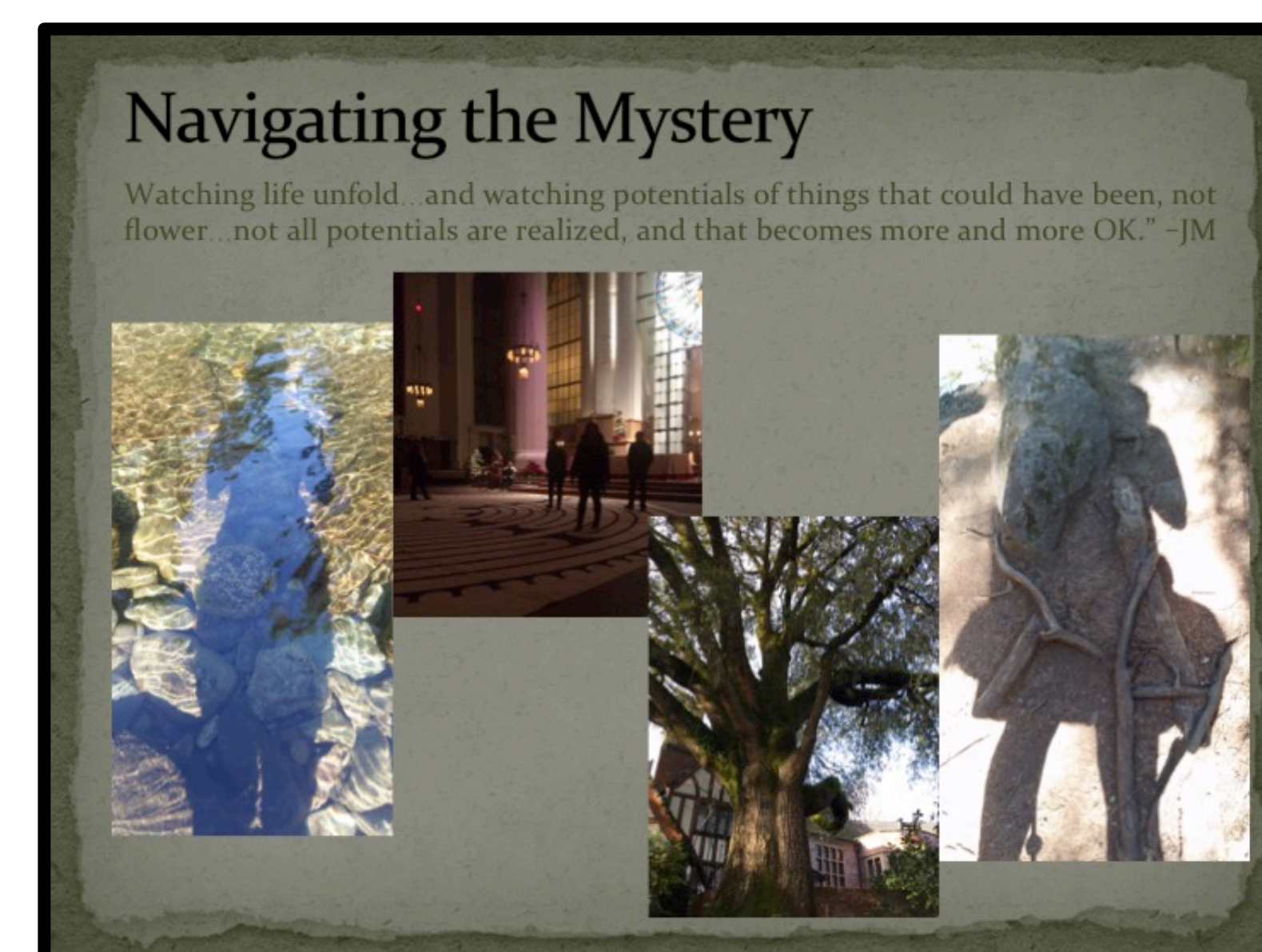
### 1. Initiation



### 2. Self-Consciousness



### 3. Effort



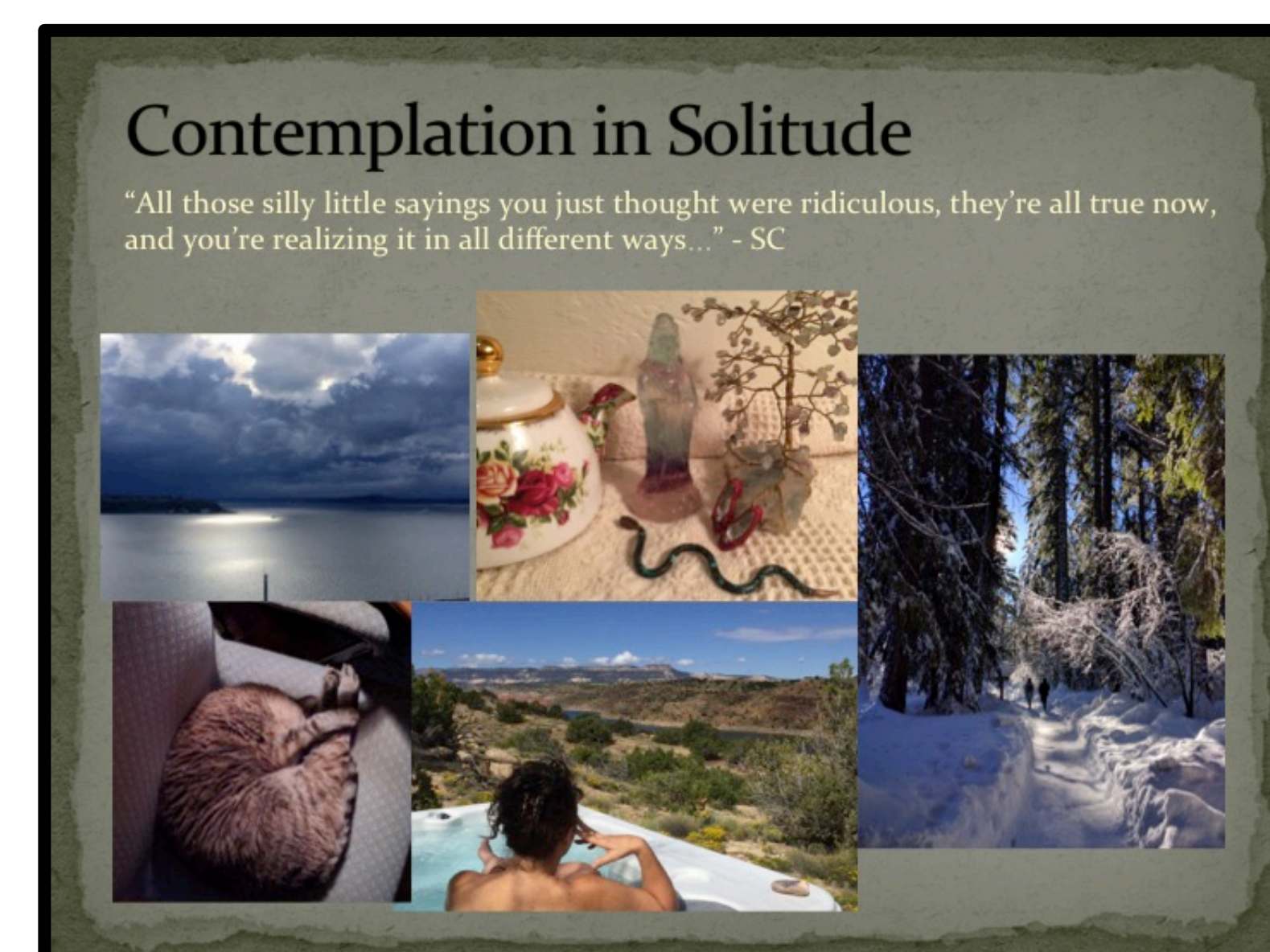
### 4. Perspective



### 5. Deconstruction



### 6. Surrender



### 7. Reorganization



### 8. Integration



### 9. Growth

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## Conclusions

### What Was Gained by the Group?

- Normalizing an important life event - Community, connection, validation
- A safe space to connect, share resources, and share stories about this phase of life
- Acknowledging internal ageism - The importance of menopause was overlooked until it became relevant and immediate
- Acknowledging tension between the biomedical and feminist "natural" perspective

### What Was Learned?

- Menopause, to these women, was a rapid change of self-identity, that was more internally-focused than externally influenced
- Process echoed Erickson's stages of development from generativity vs. stagnation to ego integrity vs. despair
- Body image, relationships and career became less important
- Prioritizing own needs, self-care, autonomy, solitude, and creating boundaries became more important
- Women feel at a loss for where to turn for trusted information and advice

### Recommendations for Future Study

Putting aside the tension between the medical model and the "natural" voice will mitigate the restricting effect it has on women's self-efficacy and self-esteem. Designing research that looks beyond symptom management, sheds outdated expectations of women's roles, and inquires into what is important to older women currently, will better inform social workers in developing psychoeducational interventions from a strengths perspective.